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Firm Stand Is Warning To Hanoi

American Leaders Still Uncertain Of Red Motives

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The United States turned loose its military might on North Viet-Nam last night to prevent the Communist leaders in Hanoi and Peking from making the mistaken decision that they could attack American ships with impunity.

But the initial United States decision was for limited action, a sort of tit-for-tat retaliation, and not a decision to escalate the war in Southeast Asia.

These views came last night from official American sources who would not let themselves be otherwise identified. But there was no doubt they reflected the views of President Johnson and what was described as the unanimous decision of all top American policy makers meeting in the Security Council.

No one here was prepared to say where the President's decision might lead. Yet no one doubted the historic immensity of the step and its possible vast consequences.

Attacks Puzzling

The great mystery here was whether the attacks by North Vietnamese PT boats on the American vessels were part of some larger scheme on the Communist side to escalate the war. It was said by American sources that the attacks, clearly not accidental, could be part of some over-all plan.

While there was a determination here not to create the overwhelming atmosphere of crisis that accompanied the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, the chief distinction between that affair and the new one in Southeast Asia was said to be that in the current case there is no sign that a nuclear exchange might be involved.

The central point in American thinking, it was emphasized, was that the attacks required a quick United States response, carried out in the daylight hours immediately following the second attack which occurred at night.

As of early Wednesday morning, there was no word either the North Vietnamese or the Communist Chinese.

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Decision Warns Hanoi and Peking They Err on U.S. as 'Paper Tiger'

to the American air attacks ordered by President Johnson. The United States could only hope that it had made its point, that its military action had shown it was not a "paper tiger" as Peking has so often contended.

The measured response, as the American attack was termed, was not a pretext of any kind to escalate the war or otherwise carry it to North Viet-Nam. The areas attacked were said to be isolated with the likelihood of minimum civilian casualties. Only PT-boat installations were targeted.

The decision by the President, made at mid-day Tuesday, came so fast that there was no time to consult with America's allies. Word of what is being done and the reasons for the action are to be passed today to allies in all parts of the world.

U.N. to get Explanation

The United Nations Security Council today will hear a similar explanation. But it is not thought likely, because of the Soviet Union's veto, that any prompt action one way or the other is possible there.

The resolution the President said he is asking Congress to pass is still being drafted. Its form was said to be somewhat similar, as of now, to that approved by Congress during the Eisenhower Administration in the Lebanon crisis. This would be a general grant of authority to the President in Southeast Asia.

However, it was said there was no question that the Pres-

ident, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, had the right to use military power as he has done without a declaration of war. There are some 100 precedents in American history for this, it was said, dating back at least to the Barbary Pirates in the last century.

Reason for Delay

While the decision by the President was made at mid-day, it took several hours for the operation to get under way. That accounted, it was said, for the long delay in the President's speech to the Nation late last night. Even at that, he didn't know as he spoke just how the attack had turned out.

He also wanted to be sure of many details before meeting with congressional leaders. Administration officials said that the President told them of his decision and that none of the leaders raised any question as to what he had decided. The only questions, it was added, had to do with how Congress could show its agreement and concern in the crisis.

As to why the President called Sen. Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate, it was said that in a national problem of security it was a perfectly natural thing to do. There was no discussion, it was added, at any time relating to the effect of the new crisis or the President's move on the election.

While the American intention was to wipe out the North Vietnamese PT-boat capability

in one strike by low-flying fighter-bombers from aircraft carriers, officials would not foreclose the possibility of a second strike. That would depend on the results of the first, it was indicated.

Aims to End Threat

It was emphasized time and again that the intention was to deal with the PT-boat threat to American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. It was said that the United States did not intend to have its ships dodging torpedoes in international waters.

The American officials involved, it was evident last night, were fully aware of what could follow the course on which the President has embarked. They are uncertain of North Vietnamese or Red Chinese motives and unclear about the reaction of the Soviet Union.

But the central point in coming to a decision to use force was a feeling that only this kind of an American response could make the Communists who sent out the PT-boats see that to continue such attacks on American ships could lead to a major conflict whose end no one could foretell.